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ABSTRACT

This paper defines the variables involved in relational communication, incorporates and organizes these variables into a framework, and proposes relationships between these variables to produce a model with heuristic capabilities. Relational messages include information about the feelings, personalities, and identities of the people involved in communication interaction. The basis for evaluating relational messages is in terms of six dimensions: consistency, salience, stability, valence, perceived manipulation, and idiosyncratic credit. This model has been developed to provide a framework which illustrates the essential components of relational communication and their interrelationships in a concise manner. (RB)

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RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION: AN INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND STRUCTURE

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RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION: AN INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND STRUCTURE

The recent upsurge in literature on such communication topics as transactional analysis, sensitivity training, human relations, and nonverbal communication brings to light people's interest in, and need for a better understanding of interpersonal communication. Since these popular approaches to communication seem to recognize a personal dimension in the process of human interaction, it seems appropriate for the field of communication to consider such questions as, "What is this personal dimension?," "How is it communicated?," and "What are its effects?"

Leonard Hawes (1973) considered these issues in a recent Quarterly Journal of Speech article:

> Communication functions not only to transmit information but to define the nature of the relationship binding the symbol users. (p. 15)

While Hawes (1973) and Watzlawick et. al. (1967) recognized the interdependency of content and relational aspects of a message, little research has been conducted in either the interdependency of these aspects of a message or in the relational aspects of a message. For convenience, the relational aspects of messages will be referred to as relational messages for the duration of this paper. Communication scholars have focused on the content of messages by analyzing such aspects as persuasive appeals, linguistic structure, and stylistic devices but, on the whole, have neglected the study of relational messages. On the other hand, a number of social psychologists have theorized about specific aspects of relational communication but have not integrated the theories into a global view of relational communication. The study of the interdependency between content and relational messages is inhibited by an incomplete conceptualization of the framework of relational communication. Thus, this paper will (1) define the variables involved in relational messages, (2) incorporate and organize these variables into a framework of relational communication and (3) propose relationships between

these variables which allow for explanation and prediction, thus producing a model with heuristic capabilities.

Relational messages include information about the feelings, personalities and identities of the people involved in communication interaction. These messages are manifested in terms of evaluation, criticism, reinforcement, or support. One may perceive relational messages to be the interaction of self-concepts, for self-concept, as defined by John Keltner (1970) is "composed of those physical and social perceptions of ourselves that we have acquired through our interaction with others and that have been validated by our experience." (p. 45)

A relational message, therefore, reflects person A's perception of himself, his perception of person B, and particularly his relationship with B. Similarly, B encodes relational messages in response to A which in turn may affect A's self-concept and the interaction of these messages defines the relationship between the participants. According to Keltner's definition, these messages are instrumental in creating and maintaining a person's self-concept.

It could be contended that one goal of communication is confirmation of identities in order to gain support for one's own perception of reality as substantiated by others. Before such confirmation can be given, however, the individual must be included in a relationship, and this notion is suggested by William Schutz (1958) as he defined inclusion as one of three basic interpersonal needs. He defines inclusion as the need to establish and maintain a feeling of mutual interest in other people. Inclusion entails the choice of engaging in a relationship as opposed to refusing to include or interact with another person. Inclusion is the recognition of the existence and worth of another individual and the communication of the recognition. If the recognition is supportive, then it can be described in Paul Watzlawick's et. al. (1967) term confirmation. Confirmation is support for a person's identities and self perceptions in relation to others.

On the other hand, a person can be included in a relationship yet receive negative feedback. Watzlawick et. al. (1967) called such negative response rejection:

> Rejection, however no matter how painful, presupposes at least limited recognition of what is being rejected and, therefore, does not necessarily negate the reality of /a person's/ view of himself. (p. 85)

Basically a relational message of rejection provides for self-correction. The message says, in essence, "I care enough about you to include you in a relationship, but you exhibit certain behaviors which I reject, and I would be more supportive of alternative behaviors." Because the need for inclusion potentially outweighs the anxiety induced when confirmation is denied, the contention might be made that, when rejection occurs, a person will either alter those behaviors which have been rejected, or will seek other relationships which confirm his or her identity. Thus, Schutz's (1958) umbrella term "inclusion" covers both confirmation and rejection.

Watzlawick et. al. (1967) termed the opposite of inclusion, disconfirmation. They suggest that a disconfirming response communicates, "You do not exist to me" or "You are not important to me," without an opportunity for confirmation or rejection of a person's interpretation of reality. One who is disconfirmed, therefore, may lose many of the social constancies or anchor points for his or her reality which, Cantril (1957) suggests, are necessary for the health and well-being of the individual.

Evelyn Sieburg (1969) identified seven disconfirming responses which are involved in human interaction. These responses include (1) impervious response--one speaker fails to acknowledge the other's communicative attempt, (2) interrupting response--one speaker begins to speak while the other is speaking, (3) irrelevant response--one speaker responds in a way that seems unrelated to what the other has been saying, (4) tangetial response--one speaker acknowledges the

other's communication but takes the conversation in another direction, (5) impersonal response--a speaker carries on a monologue which is particularly impersonal (devoid of personal references), (6) incoherent response--one speaker rambles or gives imcomplete remarks, and (7) incongruous response--the speaker's nonverbal or paralanguage behavior contradicts his or her verbal message.

Disconfirmation often results in termination of a relationship, for the relational message which is conveyed suggests "I don't want to interact with you" for any of a multitude of reasons. On the other hand, inclusive relational messages are exemplified by either "I support you" or "I care about you but there are some behaviors of yours with which I am not completely satisfied," A further elaboration of relational communication necessitates examination of how such inclusion or non-inclusion (disconfirming) messages are encoded and decoded in human interaction as discussed in the following section.

As mentioned previously, William Schutz (1958) has identified the three interpersonal needs of inclusion, control, and affection. Inclusion has already been considered; the role of control and affection as factors in a relational message will not be discussed. Control refers to the decision making processes between two people and to the aspects of the relational message which indicates who is directing or dominating a particular dyadic relationship. This control factor is the essential variable in complementary and symmetrical relationships as defined by Watzlawick et. al. (1967). Similarly, the climates of control-problem orientation and superiority-equality, as defined by Jack Gibb (1961), indicate varying degrees of control which are involved in relational messages.

Affection is defined by Schutz (1958) as the emotional closeness which exists between two people. Affection is what is expressed in stroking behavior which Berne (1964), among others, suggests is necessary for continued interaction.

Control and affection, therefore, are the main determinants of a relational message; these main determinants are encoded within a climate of supportiveness or defensiveness as discussed by Jack Gibb (1961). Supportive climates defined by Gibb (1961) include description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism. Defensive climates include evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, and certainty. The supportiveness or defensiveness expressed in the message may modify the receiver's final perception of the source's intended degree of control and affection.

In discussing the encoding process, the vehicles which transmit varying degrees of control and affection should be considered. Affection, for example, can be conveyed through such means as words, gifts, touch, etc. Villard and Whipple (1973) have suggested that these means of transmission are types of currencies which are exchanged between interactants. This notion of commodities of exchance in an interpersonal relationship is discussed in another form by Foa and Foa (1972).

Villard and Whipple (1973) categorize these currencies into two major headings, economic and intimate. Economic currencies involve such physical and tangible commodities as money, gifts, and right of access to one's property. A modified list of Villard and Whipple's intimate currencies include such behaviors as (1) varying levels of communication, which includes increasing degrees of self-disclosure, progressing from cliches, information-giving, expression of opinions and feelings to a discussion of feelings about the particular relationship; (2) nonverbal communication, including eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, proxemics, touching, and use of time; and (3) sexual behavior. Thus, currencies are the means through which relational messages are expressed with the individual interactants determining the value of the currencies and acceptance of a particular currency as a mode of exchange.

Relational messages, then, begin with a decision to include or not include another person. If that person is included, then the source will confirm or reject

that person, while non-inclusion leads to disconfirmation. The particular relational message, however, is an expression of varying degrees of control and affection which are conveyed supportively or defensively in terms of one or more currencies.

How is a relational message interpreted? Decoding relational messages differs from the interpretation of content messages due to the factor of personal involvement. Relational messages convey information about how a relationship is defined and information about how one is seen by others. Since this personal dimension is ego-involving, risk is associated with disclosure of personal feelings. The risk can be reduced, however, when a minimal amount of discrepancy exists between the levels of disclosure of the interactants. The concepts of behavior exchange or social exchange theory as discussed by Homans (1961) and Gergen (1969) provide a viable framework in which the exchange of relational messages may be viewed.

The exchange of relational messages is analogous to a balance or scale which allows the investments a person has made in a relationship to be "weighed" against the rewards recieved from the interaction and which he or she perceives the other person to have invested. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) illustrate this point:

> The basic assumption running throughout our analysis is that every individual voluntarily enters and stays in any relationship as long as it is adequately satisfactory in terms of his rewards and costs. (p. 37)

One person may perceive that he or she has invested much more in the relationship than has the other person. Such a situation, when one side of the scale becomes severely out of balance in comparison to the other side, leads to an unsatisfactory relationship. The costs or investments which are involved in relational exchanges include affection and control, as manifested in terms of various currencies.

The evaluation of these costs and rewards is a contingent evaluation of the currencies used in the interaction. If a particular currency is perceived by the receiver to have high value, this currency may be considered a high reward in terms of a behavior exchange paradigm. It would be inappropriate, however, to place a value upon a currency strictly on the basis of the currencies which the receiver desires. One must recognize the perceptual dimension of such an exchange because although a particular currency may have a low value to the receiver, the receiver may recongize that the currency has high value for the source and hence positively evaluate the currency. In terms of Laing, Phillipson and Lee's (1966) spiral of reciprocal perspectives, one must, at the very least, consider the direct perspective and the metaperspective of the value of a currency. One could even consider a meta-metaperspective, as the receiver perceives what the source felt the receiver desired in terms of currencies. Only through the use of such a perceptual framework can the appropriate contingencies be considered and provide a means of determining the worth of a currency to the reciever.

The following six dimensions provide a basis for evaluating the rewards and costs involved in the exchange procudure. These factors, including (1) consistency with previous messages, (2) saliency of the identity being supported, (3) stability of the identity being supported, (4) valence of the identity being supported, (5) perceived degree of manipulation, and (6) idiosyncratic credit, are not intended to be exhaustive, nor are they listed in order of importance.

The first evaluative dimension is consistency of a relational message with prior relational and content messages. If a relational message suggests a drastic change from what previous messages have conveyed, for example, skepticism as to the intention of the source is likely. If the message is perceived as being consistent with prior messages, a minimum of dissonance can be expected.

The second evaluative dimension considers the appropriateness of the relational message as it relates to the identities of the receiver which are confirmed, rejected, or disconfirmed. A relational message which focuses upon a peripheral--and perhaps insignificant--identity of a receiver would presumably have far less importance than a message concerned with a highly salient identity. This factor of saliency is discussed by Villard and Whipple (1973).

The third evaluative dimension is stability which refers to the need for support associated with each identity. If two identities are equally salient, the message which supports the less stable identity is expected to have more impact. In other words, a relational message regarding an identity which has obtained repetitive support in the past is less valuable to the receiver than is a message which supports an equally salient, but less frequently supported, identity.

The fourth evaluative dimension is valence, which is the positive or negative connotation associated with an identity. If a person perceives either a stigma or a positive feeling associated with an identity which he holds, there will be an accompanying effect as he recieves a relational message. For example, a relational message which supports a positively valenced identity will have greater impact than a message supporting a negatively valenced identity.

A fifth dimension in which relational messages are evaluated is the degree of perceived manipulation of the message. If the receiver perceives the source to be manipulating the message, the rewards which were perceived in terms of the evaluative dimensions just described are likely to be negated. This mediation effect must be considered before a final exchange comparison can be made.

The sixth evaluative dimension incorporates a process view of communication into this relational model. If a message is not particularly supportive, it still may be tolerated and accepted by the reciever without a great deal of

rejection. Altman and Taylor (1973) suggest that this tolerance is a function of the length of interaction between two people: i.e. old friends are more tolerant of this kind of message than are new acquaintances. Hollander (1958) provides a conceptual explanation for this phenomenon. Idiosyncratic credit is the accumulation of positively disposed impressions held by the receiver and is credited to the source if he or she deviates from expectancies. Since this concept of credit relies heavily on a process view of communication, the length of interaction is associated with the amount of credit attained. This credit (or debit) explains the behaviors observed by Altman and Taylor (1973).

Thus, a relational message is perceived and evaluated in terms of the six dimensions of (1) consistency, (2) salience, (3) stability, (4) valence, (5) perceived manipulation, and (6) idiosyncratic credit. Consideration of these six dimensions should be made simultaneously in order to evaluate interactions among these factors. For example, it should be noted that there is an interaction between salience, stability, and valence in determining the extent of identity confirmation. The total amount of reward or cost emanating from the evaluative dimensions and their interactions is compared to the receiver's investment in the relationship using a behavior exchange model. The relative imbalance occurring will suggest the overall amount of confirmation or rejection in a particular message. For example, if the receiver perceives that he or she has invested far more than he or she has received, an outcome of rejection is expected. It should be noted, however, that this rejection would represent only one interaction; and that patterns of behavior, not a single interaction, are needed to define a relationship. If a pattern of confirmation exists on the part of both interactants, the intensity or intimacy of the relationship will increase. Furthermore, one must recognize that a pattern of rejection has the potential of being interpreted as disconfirmation. This interpretation will therefore

affect the resultant behaviors as discussed next in this paper.

According to Dubin (1969), theories have three functions: heuristic, explanation, and prediction. Thus far, the consideration of this relational communication model has been limited to explanation. While the prediction capabilities of this theory are only speculative at this point, the following framework may provide some ways to consider prediction of behaviors in relational communication.

Upon interpreting a relational message, the receiver has the opportunity to accept, reject, or ignore the message. Acceptance or rejection of the message, apparent in behavioral response, indicates a choice to deal with the message. Behavioral responses may include (1) maintenance of behaviors and/or roles, (2) modification of behaviors and/or roles (usually in accord with the wishes of the source of the relational message), or (3) termination of the relationship. If, on the other hand, the initial relational message is ignored, the information is essentially not processed, and no behavior change is needed since the possibility of dissonance was avoided.

After decoding the relational message and possibly responding behaviorally, the receiver, in return, encodes a relational message to the source. This relational message will be in the form of confirmation, rejection, or disconfirmation, thus continuing the communication process.

Although this model has been basically developed in a unidirectional manner, the notion of a communication system in which all interactants simultaneously and continuously send and receive relational messages is not to be overlooked. This model has been developed to provide a framework which illustrates the essential components of relational communication and their inter-relationships in a concise manner. The constant interaction of these components and the messages sent and received by both source and reciever are functions of

the total relational communication system and thus must be considered. Although this model could easily be percieved as being unidirectional, one must recognize the sytemic, multidirectional aspects of the relational communication process.

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